

# **Politicians as Party Hacks: Party Loyalty and Public Distrust in Politicians**

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**Abstract:**

Public distrust in politicians is widespread across Western democracies. This general pattern suggests that the problem not only reflects dissatisfaction with government performance and misconduct—the main focus in existing research—but also how democratic politics is generally conducted. This article identifies a mismatch between the representation facilitated by modern democracies and the representation wanted by a majority of citizens. Because political representation is organized around cohesive parties, several institutions incentivize politicians to exhibit loyalty to party policy over other considerations (partisan representation). Observational and experimental data from three countries demonstrate that citizens generally perceive politicians as conducting partisan representation, but they prefer that politicians follow their own conscience (trustee representation) and constituency (delegate representation) over party policy. This mismatch translates into distrust in politicians, even in countries with strong norms for party discipline and among politicians' own party supporters. The findings have implications for understanding and counteracting political distrust.

**Keywords:** political trust, representative style, political parties, political representation, party democracy

Supplementary material for this article is available in the appendix in the online edition.

Replication files are available in the JOP Data Archive on Dataverse

(<http://thedata.harvard.edu/dvn/dv/jop>).

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Public trust in politicians is generally low (Dalton 2017; Clarke et al. 2018, 1-3). This observation is critical as trust in politicians helps ensure that citizens support and comply with the law (Easton 1965). To account for this phenomenon, scholars have identified important explanations pertaining to incumbent government performance and misconduct, such as citizens' dissatisfaction with the economy, scandals, and the political agenda (Miller 1974; Hetherington and Rudolph 2008). However, the widespread pattern of distrust in politicians across most Western countries, even in contexts of economic growth and absent government scandals, suggests that the problem also reflects a general dissatisfaction with how politics is conducted (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002; Dalton 2017; Clarke et al. 2018). In other words, the problem may also be structural, meaning that citizens are dissatisfied with some fundamental aspect of politicians' behavior, which is rooted and institutionalized within the political system.

One fundamental aspect of politicians' behavior is that they organize within and exhibit loyalty to political parties. Modern party democracy, by design, entails institutions that uphold a certain level of party loyalty and unity among politicians. This allows parties to build majorities and govern effectively and helps citizens hold elites accountable without knowing the opinions and vote records of individual politicians (Schattschneider 1942; Carey 2007).

This article argues that politicians' party loyalty—from the perspective of most citizens—is not part of the solution but indeed part of the problem. While citizens generally see politicians as strongly committed and loyal to the political line of the party, they prefer that politicians follow their own convictions and the opinions of their local constituents over party policy. This mismatch makes citizens see politicians as “party hacks” who are overly concerned with their own party careers, unable to take individual stances, and disconnected from the opinions of ordinary citizens, which translates into distrust in politicians. Observational and experimental data from six surveys with more than 7,000 respondents in three countries support that politicians' party loyalty is a source of public distrust in politicians. The effects of party loyalty

travel to countries with strong cultures and norms for party discipline and to politicians' own party supporters.

Establishing party loyalty as a source of distrust in politicians is important for three reasons. First, the findings suggest that distrust in politicians, in part, reflects citizens' dissatisfaction with behavior that is institutionalized and facilitated in many political systems. The article answers recent calls to move beyond accounts stressing low incumbent performance and misconduct in specific countries and identify more generic, structural aspects of politics that may depress and impede public trust in politicians more generally (e.g., Dalton 2017). While important contextual scope conditions for the reported findings may apply (as discussed in detail below), the results establish that the adverse effects of politicians' party loyalty travel across important institutional and cultural settings. Second, the findings suggest that politicians may lack incentives to change their representation according to the preferences of citizens: Because the political system provides political parties with control mechanisms to uphold a certain level of party discipline (e.g., candidate selection, cabinet nomination, campaign financing), politicians will face clear institutional constraints in carrying out the political representation that citizens expect. Third, the findings imply a difficult trade-off between upholding party discipline to facilitate stability and accountability in political representation and building and maintaining public trust in politicians.

### **Political Representation in Party Democracies**

The question to whom politicians are primarily loyal has been subject to much attention in political science research. Research has largely been organized around the concept of politicians' representative styles. A partisan style of representation implies that politicians remain loyal to the political program formulated by their party over other considerations when voting and communicating in public. In contrast, the delegate style and trustee style imply that they follow the interests of their constituency or their own conscience, respectively (Eulau et al. 1959;

Blomgren and Rozenberg 2012).<sup>1</sup> An extensive literature has demonstrated that different representative styles exist but that the partisan style of representation tends to dominate (Blomgren and Rozenberg 2012; Martin 2014; Deschouwer and Depauw 2014). By institutional design, parties hold control mechanisms, such as control over candidate nomination, committee assignment, and campaign financing, to enforce loyalty and, in turn, govern effectively (Kam 2009; Martin 2014; Bøggild and Pedersen 2018).

Although it is well established that the partisan style of representation is prevalent among politicians, surprisingly little research has analyzed how it affects citizens' political opinions. As noted by Lapinski et al. (2016, 535), "the supply side" of this issue (the representative styles politicians adopt) has been studied extensively, but "the demand side" (citizens' preferences for and reactions to politicians' representative styles) is much less explored (see also Bøggild and Pedersen 2018, 895). Below, I argue that public distrust in politicians partly stems from a mismatch between the supply and demand sides of politicians' representative styles.

### **Mismatches in Representation and Public Distrust in Politicians**

The supply and demand terminology is useful for understanding the literature on public (dis-)trust in politicians. This literature aims to understand the preferences and expectations citizens hold for political representatives (the demand side) and which of these preferences they are not seeing fulfilled by their politicians (the supply side).<sup>2</sup> Existing research has uncovered important explanations for distrust in politicians in terms of incumbents' failures to deliver on citizens' performance-related and moral expectations. Trust in politicians decreases in times where large parts of the citizenry experience a mismatch between their ideological preferences and the policy

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<sup>1</sup> In many instances, the preferences of a politician, the party, and the constituency will be aligned, meaning that different representative styles will result in the same behavior. Still, discrepancies are inevitable, especially because a party's positions across numerous political issues are unlikely to match the positions of all its individual members and the local constituencies they represent (Carey 2007; Kam 2009). Discrepancies may also occur between individual members and their constituency with potentially important implications. I return to this in the discussion below.

<sup>2</sup> This notion is formally expressed in expectancy-disconfirmation theory, holding that mismatches between preferences and perceptions can translate into low trust in politicians. Expectancy-disconfirmation theory does not hold that any mismatch citizens observe will automatically translate into distrust. Hence, studying the effects of such mismatches must be substantiated with theoretical arguments for why and through which mechanisms such effects occur (see e.g., Kimball & Patterson 1997).

outputs they see produced by the incumbent government (Miller 1974). Similarly, trust in politicians varies according to perceptions of government performance such as the state of the economy or crime rates (Keele 2007). Finally, distrust in politicians partly stems from a mismatch between, on the one hand, citizens' expectations about politicians' adherence to social and democratic norms and, on the other hand, politicians' moral and legal transgressions in private or in politics (Hetherington and Rudolph 2008, 499-500; for a review, see Dalton 2017, 382-385).

Such explanations undoubtedly help account for historical drops in political trust within countries as well as cross-country differences. However, they fare less well in explaining why trust in politicians—despite country variation—is generally low in many countries and why it often persists even under favorable conditions such as a prospering economy (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002; Hetherington and Rudolph 2008; Dalton 2017, 382–85). As Dalton (2017, 387) notes, “the commonality of this pattern across nations with different political histories and institutions prods us to look for common forces that transcend unique national conditions.”

Only few studies investigate such common factors by examining citizens' preferences and perceptions concerning more generic features of the political process and the way political representation is generally organized. In contrast to some of the literature reviewed above, this research centers on how distrust may stem from politicians following—rather than violating—basic institutional rules and expectations pertaining to the democratic process. Citizens perceive the political process as too deliberative and inefficient and too dominated by political conflict and incivility between competing elites (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002; Harbridge and Malhotra 2011; Mutz 2015). Moreover, citizens want to be more involved and heard in policy-making but see politicians as being too inclusive of interest groups and too concerned with re-election, which translates into distrust in politicians (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002; Bøggild 2016; André and Depauw 2017). These explanations point to structural mismatches between citizens' preferences for representation and basic institutional incentives that shape the behavior of politicians. Such

mismatches are particularly important to uncover if we want to understand the common features that account for low trust in politicians across many modern democracies.

Building on this literature, this article centers on citizens' preferences and perceptions concerning another structural aspect of the democratic process: Politicians' party loyalty. As mentioned above, several institutions encourage politicians to adopt the partisan over the trustee and delegate style of representation. However, research on voter behavior suggests that this style of representation might not match citizens' preferences. Experimental studies show that politicians who are described as independent from and willing to speak out against their party are often evaluated more favorably by voters (Carson et al. 2010; Campbell et al. 2016).

Observational evidence points to similar, though more mixed, evidence: some studies show that politicians who most frequently take individual stances and vote against their party receive more votes on Election Day (Carson et al. 2010; Kam 2009), whereas other studies report negligible effects (Vivyan and Wagner 2012). Moreover, across countries, delegates who fight for the material and ideological interests of their constituents are often rewarded by them (Fenno 1978; Cain, Ferejohn, and Fiorina 1987; see also Kam 2009; Bräuninger et al. 2012). Hence, it is possible that a majority of citizens prefer trustee and delegate representation over the partisan representation they should experience from their politicians.

Why should experiencing such a mismatch translate into distrust in politicians? As mentioned above, not all mismatches are important in terms of explaining distrust in politicians, meaning that studying such relationships must always be theoretically guided. Three theoretical mechanisms can support why experiencing this mismatch should translate into distrust in politicians. First, an integrity mechanism could be at work. Partisan representation could portray politicians as motivated to please powerful party colleagues and advance their own personal career within the party (e.g., obtaining re-nomination or committee positions) rather than following political principles and solving societal problems. This should be the case both when politicians follow their party at the expense of their own conscience (the trustee style) and their

constituency (the delegate style). Second, a competence mechanism could drive the effect in which partisan representation portrays politicians as codependent on their party, indecisive, and unable to take individual stances. This should particularly be the case when politicians follow their party at the expense of their own conscience, but following the party over the opinions of their constituency could also signal an inability to debate and push for policies single-handedly. Third, an attitude proximity mechanism could mediate the effect. Because parties are often viewed as elitist organizations, partisan representation could portray politicians as holding elitist views (e.g., globalist, urban, neoliberal) that are detached from those of regular citizens and basic societal problems (see e.g., Clarke et al. 2018). This should particularly be the case when politicians follow their party over their constituency, but sacrificing one's own political opinions for the sake of the party could also signal a commitment to elitist opinions and interests rather than those of regular citizens.

In sum, we should expect that a majority of citizens experience a mismatch between the partisan representation they see carried out by their politicians and their own preferences for representation and that this mismatch causes these citizens to express low trust in politicians.

### **Case Selection and Overview of Data**

The theoretical expectations about the negative effects of partisan representation outlined above point to valence mechanisms (concerning politicians' character and attitude proximity vis-à-vis citizens), which could mean that the effects are universal and travel across contexts. However, because some representative styles are more prevalent and institutionalized in certain countries compared to others, it is important to consider possible contextual scope conditions.

Consequently, countries were chosen to obtain variation on two key contextual variables. First, the negative effects of partisan representation could be weaker in countries with party-centered political systems and strong cultures and norms for party discipline. In such settings, dissent from the party line is rare, and citizens may adopt the same norms and prefer politicians to follow party policy. Second, citizens in multi-member district systems could be less likely to prefer

delegate over partisan representation compared to citizens in single-member district systems. Citizens in multi-member districts face significant challenges in evaluating whether their incumbents represent their ideological and material interests, as they would have to keep track of voting records of several incumbents simultaneously (Depauw and Martin 2009, 106). Norris (2004, 238–43) finds that multi-member district voters are less familiar with and able to recall their district representatives. This complexity involved in evaluating multiple incumbents could make citizens more favorable towards party loyalty and cohesive parties since this should constitute their best opportunity to evaluate and hold elites accountable. Hence, a strong test of the argument is if a mismatch exists and translates into distrust in politicians even in countries with strong norms for party discipline and in multi-member district systems.

To obtain variation on these two contextual variables and increase generalizability, survey data was collected in the US, the UK, and Denmark. The US should be a most-likely case for observing the expected findings with a single-member district system and party loyalty being less prevalent and institutionalized relative to other countries (Cain et al. 1987; Martin 2014). The UK is also a single-member district system but has higher levels of party loyalty (Cain et al. 1987; Depauw and Martin 2009), though party loyalty has decreased somewhat in recent years (Campbell et al. 2016, 19-20). Hence, it is possible that the effects could be weaker in the UK than in the US. Further, Denmark should be a less likely case for two reasons. First, Denmark is, like a majority of democracies, a multi-member district system. Denmark has a comparatively high average number of representatives per district at the national level (13.5), which should make it a hard case in comparative perspective. Still, Denmark is not an extreme case like the Netherlands and Israel with only a single, nation-wide district, which could make delegate representation less meaningful for citizens.<sup>3</sup> Second, Denmark has a comparatively high level of party loyalty, likely due to the strong control mechanisms available to parties (Depauw and

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<sup>3</sup> As discussed below, however, citizens in such contexts could still prefer trustee over partisan representation.

Martin 2009; Bøggild and Pedersen 2018). Notably, party loyalty in Denmark is high even though Denmark constitutes an open-list system where constituents can choose between candidates from the party list, which should encourage legislators to cater to constituents. This likely reflects that the parties retain strong control over whether the candidate will appear on the party list in the first place, suggesting that such party-level factors may in some instances be more important in enforcing party loyalty than the electoral systems (Depauw and Martin 2009; Martin 2014). Still, the case selection leaves open whether the effects travel to truly closed-list systems where voters have no control over which candidates from the party list represent their constituency, which could make voters less inclined to think about delegate representation (but see Méndez-Lago and Martínez 2002). I return to possible scope conditions in the discussion below.

**Table 1: Overview of data material**

#	Country	Data type	Sampling protocol	Sample size
1	United States	Observational and experimental	Nationally representative*	1,000
2	United Kingdom	Observational and experimental	Nationally representative*	1,073
3	Denmark	Observational and experimental	Nationally representative*	1,018
4	United Kingdom	Experimental	Nationally representative*	2,037
5	United States	Experimental	Socially diverse non-representative sample via Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk)	505
6	United States	Observational and experimental	Socially diverse non-representative sample via Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk)	2,000

*Note: \*Representative on age, gender, education, and geographical location.*

Table 1 provides an overview of the survey data material. Surveys 1-3 were identical and fielded simultaneously (April 21, 2017) by the survey agency YouGov to representative samples of citizens in the United States ( $n = 1,000$ ), the United Kingdom ( $n = 1,073$ ), and Denmark ( $n = 1,018$ ), matching the adult populations on age, gender, education, and geographical location. To maximize external as well as internal validity, the surveys entail both observational and experimental data (described in detail below). Surveys 4-6 were included to test the robustness

and increase the external validity of the experimental findings in surveys 1-3. Survey 4 was fielded by the survey agency YouGov to a representative sample of citizens in the United Kingdom (n = 2,037). Survey 5 was fielded to a diverse convenience sample of citizens in the US through MTurk (n = 505). Survey 6 was included to replicate the observational and experimental results from surveys 1-3 and test the effects of partisan representation across subjects' identification with the politician's party. This required additional experimental groups relative to the first three surveys and, in turn, more respondents. Hence, the survey included a diverse convenience sample of US citizens recruited through Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) (n = 2,000). In line with existing research (e.g., Coppock 2018), all replications using MTurk data provided close to identical results compared to the representative US sample.

## **Observational Evidence**

### *Observational data and measures*

Surveys 1-3 first measured preferences for and perceptions of politicians' representative styles. The first question was a standard formulation used and validated in elite surveys (including in the US, UK, and Denmark, see Eulau et al. 1959; Deschouwer and Depauw 2014; Bøggild and Pedersen 2018) to tap politicians' preference for partisan relative to delegate representation: "How should a politician vote if the voters in his/her constituency have one opinion on an issue and his/her party has a different opinion?" The question includes a dichotomous choice between the politician's constituency (the delegate preference) and the opinion of the party (the partisan preference). The question was followed by a new item developed for this article, measuring perceptions of the actual behavior of politicians: "And how do you think politicians in general *actually* vote if the voters in their constituency have one opinion and their party has a different opinion?" This question includes a choice between politicians following the opinion of their constituency (the delegate perception) or the party (the partisan perception). These two questions allow for a division of the subjects into four groups: (1) Those with a delegate preference and a

delegate perception, (2) those with a delegate preference but a partisan perception, (3) those with a partisan preference and a partisan perception, and (4) those with a partisan preference but a delegate perception. As outlined above, we should expect a substantial number of respondents to place themselves in the second group and to express particularly low levels of trust in politicians.

Two similar questions were asked to measure citizens' preference for and perceptions of partisan relative to trustee representation. A standard question in elite surveys (including the US, UK, and Denmark) asked: "How should a politician vote if his/her own opinion on an issue does not correspond with his/her party's position?" This question includes a choice between the politician's own opinion (the trustee preference) and the opinion of the party (the partisan preference). This question was also followed by a new question asking: "And how do you think politicians in general actually vote if their own opinion on an issue does not correspond with their party's position?" This question includes a choice between politicians following their own opinion (the trustee perception) or the opinion of their party (the partisan perception). This also allows for a creation of four groups: (1) Those with a trustee preference and a trustee perception, (2) those with a trustee preference but a partisan perception, (3) those with a partisan preference and a partisan perception, and (4) those with a partisan preference but a trustee perception. Again, we should expect a number of respondents to place themselves in the second group and to express relatively low trust in politicians. This approach to measuring mismatches has been applied and validated in the expectancy-disconfirmation literature, including in political science (e.g., Kimball and Patterson 1997). I return to the validity of the items in the analyses below.

To compare trust in politicians across these groups, the surveys included four traditional items from the American National Election Study (for operationalization and descriptive statistics, see Online Appendix A). These items were summed into an additive index with acceptable reliability ( $\alpha_{US} = 0.66$ ,  $\alpha_{UK} = 0.73$ ,  $\alpha_{DK} = 0.76$ ) and rescaled 0-1, indicating minimum and maximum trust in politicians, respectively. All regression models control for the demographic variables age, gender, and education. Moreover, the models control for political sophistication

since respondents scoring high on this variable could have higher trust in politicians and be less likely to report the expected mismatches as they may be more aware of the practical necessities of having cohesive parties (as outlined above). Finally, the models control for subjects' identification with the incumbent party on a 7-point scale (in Denmark, all three incumbent parties).

Incumbent party identifiers tend to report higher trust in politicians and, for strategic reasons, could be less likely to report the expected mismatch as they may prefer partisan representation and cohesive parties to ensure majorities for the policies they favor.

These observational data provide strong external validity because they measure citizens' actual perceptions and preferences concerning their politicians' representative styles. In combination with the nation-based stratified samples, this provides an accurate estimate of whether citizens across different countries experience the expected mismatch in representation and how this relates to distrust in politicians.

### *Analyses*

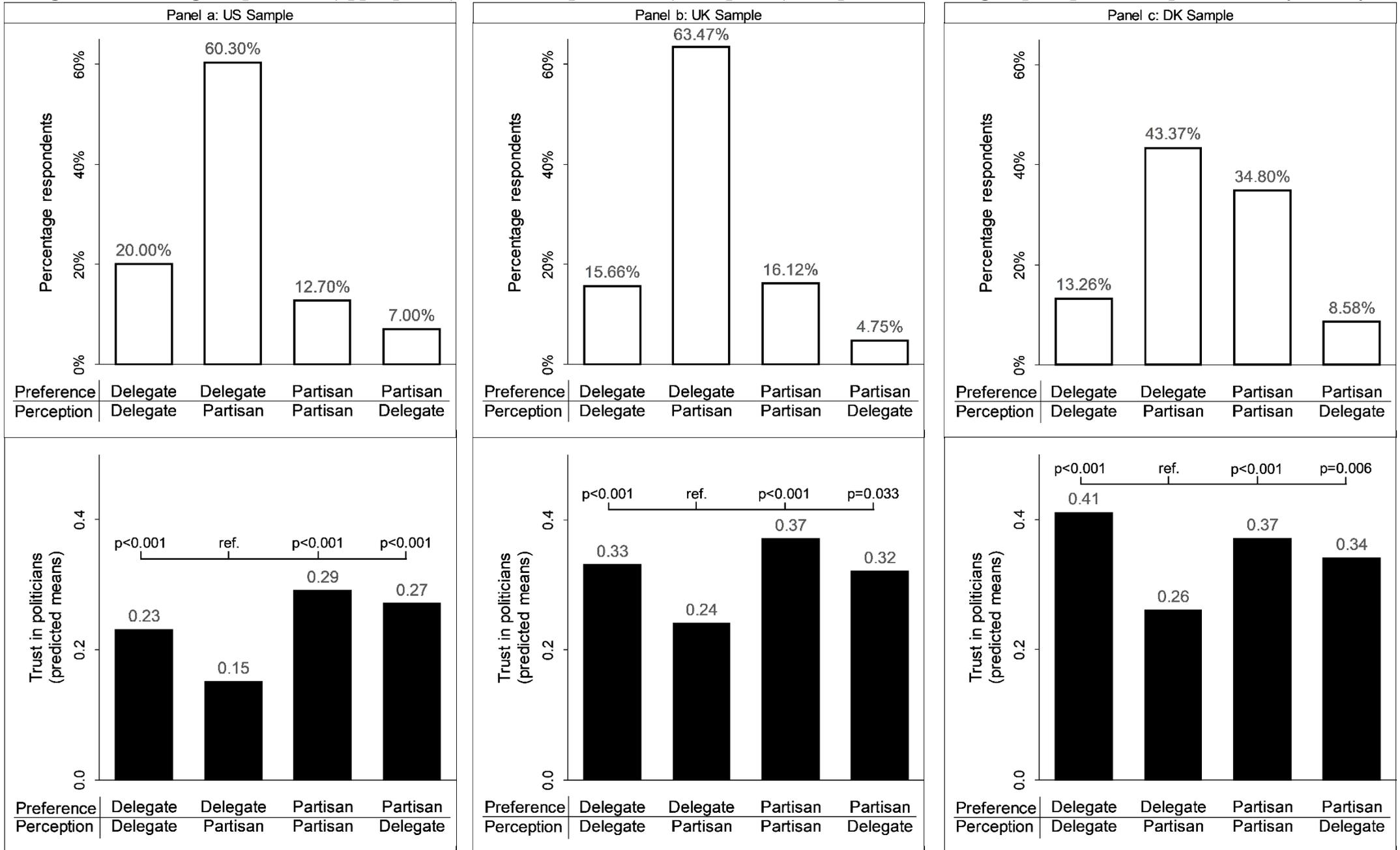
Do citizens experience a mismatch in political representation? Specifically, do citizens prefer politicians to act as delegates and trustees but perceive them as partisans? And if so, is experiencing such a mismatch associated with low levels of trust in politicians?

Figure 1 divides the respondents in each sample into four groups according to whether they perceive and prefer politicians to act as partisans or delegates (based on the two questions above). The figure reports the proportion of respondents (the upper part of each panel) and predicted mean levels of trust in politicians (the lower part of each panel) across the four groups (for full models, see Online Appendix B). Panel a, Figure 1 reports the results from the US representative sample. The upper part of the panel shows that most respondents (80.30%) prefer politicians to follow their constituency instead of their party (i.e., a delegate preference). Importantly, however, most of these respondents experience the opposite behavior by their politicians (i.e., a partisan perception). More precisely, 60.30% report a delegate preference but a partisan perception, meaning that a majority of citizens experience a mismatch between the representative style they

prefer and the style they see their politicians carry out. Thus, only 20% report that they prefer and perceive politicians to act as delegates. The remaining 19.7% report that they favor partisan representation. Hereof, 12.70% perceive politicians as conducting partisan representation, and 7% see politicians as conducting delegate representation. Hence, a different mismatch from the one outlined above—preferences for partisan representation but perceptions of delegate representation—is reported by a small minority of respondents and by less than half of the respondents who prefer partisan representation. This corroborates the validity of the used measures; if the substantial mismatch observed among respondents who prefer delegate representation were simply a result of the question wording encouraging respondents to report a mismatch, we should observe a similar mismatch among those preferring partisan representation (see also Kimball and Patterson 1997). However, this is not the case in any of the samples.

Turning to the lower part of Panel a, we see that trust in politicians is substantially and significantly lower among the 60.3% who prefer politicians to act as delegates but see them acting as partisans relative to the other groups. These differences range between 8 and 14 percentage points ( $p$ -values  $< 0.001$ ). Notably, even the 7% who report that they prefer partisan representation but perceive politicians as delegates (i.e., a different mismatch) express substantially higher trust in politicians. This suggests that citizens who prefer partisans do not respond with lower levels of trust when they see politicians acting as delegates. The fact that these 7% do not report lower trust corroborates the notion in the existing literature on political distrust (and expectancy-disconfirmation theory generally) that not all mismatches are important, and, in turn, that studying the effects of such mismatches must always be theoretically guided. However, this pattern could also reflect that these subjects are cross-pressured as they may prefer partisan representation due to its positive implications concerning accountability and efficiency as outlined above but simultaneously share the concerns with low integrity, competence, and attitude proximity outlined above. Altogether, Panel a depicts the problem: Most US citizens see a mismatch between the delegate representation they want and the partisan representation they

Figure 1: Percentage respondents (upper panels) and trust in politicians (lower panels) over partisan vs. delegate perceptions and preferences by country



Note: Predicted mean levels of trust in politicians including p-values extracted from Models 1-4 in Online Appendix B. N(US)=951. N(UK)=960. N(DK)=963.

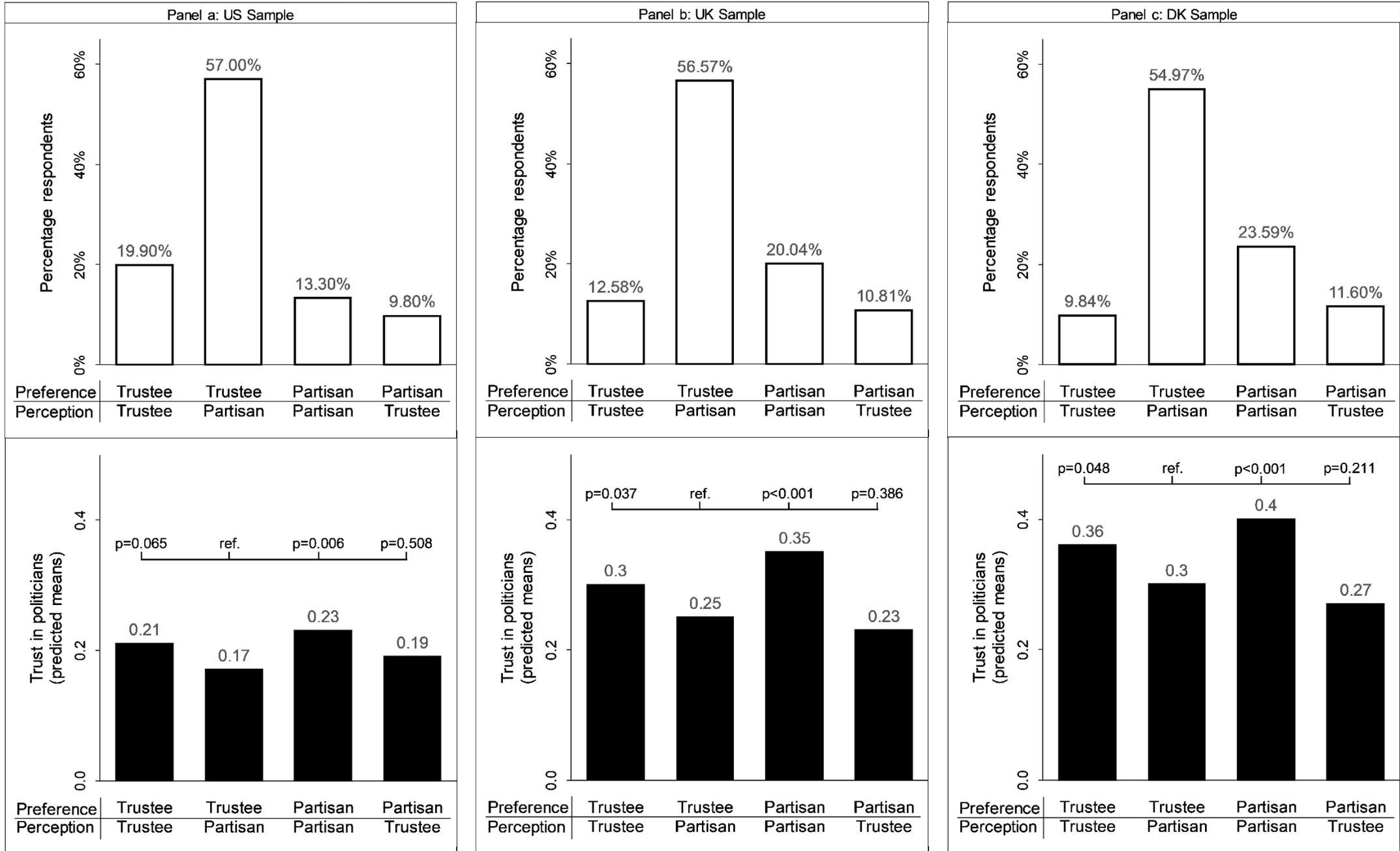
get, and experiencing this mismatch is associated with lower trust in politicians.

These findings are largely mirrored in the results from the British sample, displayed in Panel b, Figure 1. Again, the upper part of the panel shows that a clear majority (79.1%) prefer delegate over partisan representation and that 63.47% experience a mismatch between the delegate representation they want and the partisan representation they see. The lower part of Panel b shows that trust in politicians is again significantly lower among this majority compared to the other three groups with differences ranging between 8 and 13 percentage points ( $p < 0.05$ ). These findings also demonstrate that the perceived mismatch and its association with political distrust exists in a political system with a strong culture and norm for party loyalty.

Panel c, Figure 1 shows that a majority also favors delegate representation in Denmark (56.63%). However, the majority is smaller compared to the other samples ( $p$ -values  $< 0.001$ ). As theorized above, this is likely because the Danish multi-member districts make it cognitively demanding for citizens to evaluate multiple (on average over 13) incumbents, making delegate representation less attractive relative to partisan representation. This suggests that institutions play a role in shaping citizens' preferences for politicians' representative behavior. Still, even in this less likely context, most citizens prefer delegate representation, and 43.37% experience a mismatch due to the partisan representation they see from their politicians. In line with the other samples, these 43.37% express lower levels of trust in politicians compared to the other groups with differences ranging between 8 and 15 percentage points ( $p$ -values  $\leq 0.006$ ).

Figure 2 divides the respondents into four groups according to whether they perceive and prefer that politicians act as partisans or trustees across the samples. Paralleling the results in Figure 1, the upper part of Panel a shows that most US citizens prefer politicians to act as trustees rather than as partisans (76.9%) and that a majority sees a mismatch between their trustee preference and the partisan representation politicians conduct (57%). Turning to the lower part of Panel a, we see that this majority also reports lower levels of trust in politicians than

**Figure 2: Percentage respondents (upper panels) and trust in politicians (lower panels) over partisan vs. trustee perceptions and preferences by country**



Note: Predicted mean levels of trust in politicians including p-values extracted from Models 5-8 in Online Appendix B. N(US)=951. N(UK)=960. N(DK)=963.

respondents who do not experience a mismatch. These differences amount to 6 percentage points ( $p < 0.05$ ) and 3 percentage points with the latter difference only reaching marginal statistical significance ( $p = 0.065$ ). Notably, these differences are smaller than those reported in Figure 1, suggesting that US citizens may respond most negatively to partisan representation when it happens at the expense of constituency interests. The panel also depicts that a minority of respondents (9.8%) report a partisan preference and a trustee perception (a different mismatch) and that these respondents exhibit the same low level of trust in politicians. However, given the large percentage of respondents that prefer trustee representation but perceive partisan representation, it is the low trust in this group that drags down trust in politicians overall. As in Figure 1, the panel depicts the issue: Most US citizens see a mismatch between their preference for trustee representation and the partisan representation they get, and this mismatch is associated with low levels of trust in politicians.

Panels b and c in Figure 2 report very similar results from the British and Danish samples. The upper parts of panels b (the British sample) and panel c (the Danish sample) show that respondents prefer trustee over partisan representation in both samples (69.15% and 64.81%, respectively), and a majority of respondents see a mismatch between the trustee style they want and the partisan style they get (56.57% and 54.97%, respectively). Turning to the lower parts of the panels, we see that these majorities exhibit significantly lower levels of trust in politicians compared to those who do not experience a mismatch ( $p < 0.05$ ). These differences range between 5 and 10 percentage points in the British sample and 6 and 10 percentage points in the Danish sample. Consistent with the US sample, a small minority of respondents in the British and Danish samples (10.81% and 11.6%, respectively) report partisan preference and trustee perception and the same low levels of trust in politicians. However, as noted above, it is the low trust among the majority of respondents with a trustee preference and a partisan perception that makes the aggregate trust level low. Finally, Survey 6, the MTurk sample, replicates the findings from Figure 1 and 2 and provides estimates close to the US representative sample (see Online

Appendix B).

In sum, a majority of respondents perceive politicians as primarily loyal to their party (partisan representation) but prefer them to follow their constituency (delegate representation) or own conviction (trustee representation) over party policy. This finding travels to the UK with strong norms and traditions for party loyalty and to the Danish multi-member district context, although the delegate preference was slightly weaker among Danes. Experiencing such mismatches in representation is consistently associated with low trust in politicians.

### **Experimental Evidence**

The observational findings above offer strong external validity because they demonstrate the expected mismatch and its association with distrust in politicians by measuring citizens' evaluations and perceptions of the politicians in their country of residence. However, the internal validity in terms of establishing a causal effect is lower. Particularly, these observational data could be vulnerable to omitted variable bias (although control variables were included) or reverse causality since respondents could possibly report the hypothesized mismatch *because* they have low initial trust in politicians. To establish a causal effect of partisan representation on distrust in politicians, the surveys also included experimental studies.

#### *Experimental designs and measures*

In surveys 1-3, respondents were randomly assigned to take part in one of two experiments (for randomization checks, see Online Appendix C). Experiment 1 was designed to test how respondents reacted to a fictional politician following his party over his constituency (partisan representation) relative to following his constituency over his party (delegate representation). In the US survey, respondents read about a recent political decision introduced by Congress to relax the restrictions on food irradiation at the initiative of committee chair, Mark Petersen. In the British and Danish surveys, the word "Congress" was substituted with the word "Parliament" (in Danish, *Folketinget*). In the delegate condition, the description read that Mark Petersen's party had reservations about the decision, but Petersen explained that "it's important that I follow my

constituency as an elected official,” which was followed by opponents of the policy criticizing him for choosing his constituency over his party. Conversely, in the partisan condition, the description read that Mark Petersen’s constituency had reservations about the decision, but Petersen explained that “it’s important that I follow my party as an elected official,” which was followed by opponents of the policy criticizing him for choosing his party over his constituency. Importantly, the outcome of the political decision was held constant such that any possible difference between the conditions can be ascribed solely to whether the politician acted as a delegate or a partisan in reaching the decision. The US version of the experiment is displayed in the left column of Table 2.

**Table 2: Overview of experimental conditions (US version)**

<b>Experiment 1: Delegate condition vs. partisan condition</b>	<b>Experiment 2: Trustee condition vs. partisan condition</b>
A recent political decision introduced by Congress aims to relax the current restrictions on food irradiation. The policy was initiated and carried through by the chairman of the Scientific Committee on Food, Mark Petersen.	
Mark Petersen notes that his <b>party [constituency]</b> has reservations about the relaxation of food irradiation but explains that “it’s important that I follow my <b>constituency [party’s stance]</b> as an elected official.”	Mark Petersen notes that <b>his party [he personally]</b> has reservations about the relaxation of food irradiation but explains that “it’s important that I follow my <b>own [party’s]</b> stance as an elected official.”
Opponents of the policy have criticized Mark Petersen for turning his back on his <b>party [constituents]</b> to follow his <b>constituents [party]</b> on this important matter.	Opponents of the policy have criticized Mark Petersen for turning his back on his <b>party [own intuition]</b> to follow his <b>own intuition [party]</b> on this important matter.

The second experiment was identical in its description of the politician and the political decision except it was designed to test how respondents reacted to a politician following his party over his own conviction (partisan representation) relative to following his own conviction over his party (trustee representation). The trustee condition read that Mark Petersen’s party had reservations about the decision, but Petersen explained that “it’s important that I follow my own stance as an elected official,” which was followed by opponents of the policy criticizing him for

following his own intuition over his party. Conversely, in the partisan condition, the description read that Mark Petersen personally had reservations about the decision, but Petersen explained that “it’s important that I follow my party as an elected official,” which was followed by opponents of the policy criticizing him for choosing his party over his own intuition. The US version of the experiment is displayed in the right column of Table 1. In both experiments, trust in Mark Petersen was measured by asking: “To what extent do you trust a politician like Mark Petersen?” on a 0-10 scale, ranging from “No trust” to “High trust,” rescaled 0-1.

The advantage of the experimental designs in Surveys 1-3 is that they provide clean and comparable estimates across the three countries. However, to ensure comparability across the countries, the experimental stimuli were somewhat stylized and left out information typically available to citizens. In Surveys 4-6, the experimental designs were modified in different ways to test the robustness and generalizability of the results obtained from Surveys 1-3.

Survey 4 was collected to address three features of the experiments in Surveys 1-3 that could limit the generalizability of the findings. First, to keep the name and policy content constant and avoid differential pre-treatment effects across the country, the politician and the policy proposal were fictional (both were, however, presented to subjects as real, followed by a full debriefing). Second, following Kam (2005), food irradiation was chosen as the political issue because it has been subject to political debate and legislation across several countries, making it a relevant political issue suitable for a cross-national study.<sup>4</sup> Still, this issue may not be particularly salient or a topic on which citizens have prior opinions. Third, while committee chairs are influential in initiating and passing policy in the US and Denmark, they exert less influence in the UK. Survey 4 was fielded to a representative sample of UK citizens ( $n = 2,037$ ) with a similar experimental setup, except it accommodated the three potential shortcomings of the cross-national study mentioned above (for full stimuli and measures, see Online Appendix D). The experiments

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<sup>4</sup> Moreover, the parties are not strongly polarized on food irradiation, making it possible to experimentally investigate the effects across respondents’ identification with the politician’s party (analyzed in Survey 6).

described a real and current tax policy proposal by the Labour party to introduce a new levy on second homes. The proposal featured at the 2018 Labour conference and in national news media just prior to the launch of the survey. Instead of describing a fictitious committee chair, the politician in focus was senior MP John Healey, the Labour shadow housing minister, who had commented frequently on the proposal in the media.

Survey 5 modified Experiment 1 (testing partisan vs. delegate representation) by describing a more typical, low-stake policy-making situation. The original Experiment 1 in Surveys 1-3 indicated that the entire constituency had the same position on the issue and expressed this position publicly to their representative, which could signal to respondents that the policy was highly salient with substantial implications for constituents. This could skew respondents' preferences in favor of representatives to follow their constituency over the party compared to a more everyday-like policy-making context where constituencies are not mobilized and hold mixed views on a given policy. In Survey 5, the delegate condition was modified and read that Mark Petersen had announced that he intended to "go against his party's position on the issue and vote for the proposal because polls indicate that a majority of his constituents supports its content." Conversely, the partisan condition read that Petersen intended to follow his party's position and vote for the proposal even though polls indicated a majority of constituents opposing the content (for full stimuli, see Online Appendix E). This setup allows for a test of whether citizens still respond negatively to partisan representation in a more typical, low-stake policy-making situation where constituents are not mobilized and hold mixed views of the policy.

Survey 6 was collected to test if citizens' reactions to partisan representation could vary according to party identification (i.e., an interaction logic) in two ways. First, it is possible that citizens only respond to partisan representation with distrust when it is conducted by politicians from opposing parties while they ignore—or even favor—such behavior from politicians from their own party. Citizens tend to evaluate the same actions of politicians (e.g., policy proposals, performance) more favorably and defend negative behavior and performance when carried out

by politicians from their own party (Druckman, Peterson, and Slothuus 2013), and citizens could therefore react less negatively to partisan representation from in-party politicians. For strategic reasons, citizens might also only want politicians from opponent parties to act as trustees and delegates to avoid majorities for unfavorable policies while rewarding their own party's politicians for acting as partisans to ensure majorities for the policies they favor. Second, partisan representation could decrease trust only among citizens who support opposition parties while having no effect—or even positive effects—among incumbent party supporters. Incumbent party supporters could be more inclined to tolerate—or even favor—partisan representation since it is a precondition for their party to maintain its majority and pass its policies. Testing these two potential scope conditions is important: if partisan representation has such differential effects, it would neither decrease nor increase trust in politicians in general since different styles will be rewarded and sanctioned by different parts of the citizenry (i.e., a zero-sum logic).

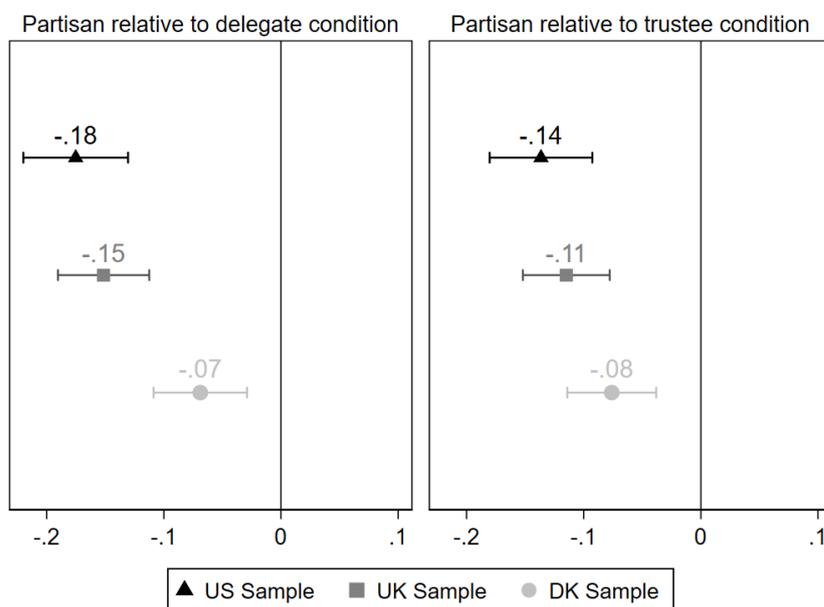
To test if partisan representation also decreases trust among politicians' own party supporters, Experiments 1 and 2 in Surveys 1-3 were extended in Survey 6 by describing Mark Petersen 1) without any party label (as in the other surveys), 2) as a Republican, 3) as a Democrat (i.e., six experimental groups in each experiment). Prior to the experiment, the survey measured respondents' party affiliation using a standard 7-point partisan strength scale ranging from "Strong Democrat" to "Strong Republican." For subjects assigned to an experimental condition with a party label, this item was used to generate a scale measuring how strongly the respondents identified with the party to which Mark Petersen was described as belonging (randomly described as Republican or Democrat). This variable was rescaled 0-1, indicating strong identification with the opposite party and Mark Petersen's party, respectively.

To test if the effects also extend to supporters of the incumbent party (in Denmark, three parties), all effects of partisan representation reported from the observational and experimental data in the six surveys were interacted with a 7-point scale tapping identification with the incumbent party in the respondents' country (for operationalization, see Online Appendix A).

## Analyses

Does partisan representation have a causal effect on public distrust in politicians? Figure 3 reports the results from Experiments 1 and 2 in surveys 1-3. The left-hand panel of Figure 3 shows the effects of the partisan condition relative to the delegate condition on trust in the political representative, Mark Petersen, (i.e., Experiment 1) across the three samples. As expected, trust is substantially lower when the politician is described as a partisan rather than a delegate. These effects amount to 18, 15, and 7 percentage points in the US, UK, and Danish samples, respectively (all  $p$ -values  $\leq 0.001$ ). The figure also reveals that the effects are similar in the US and UK sample ( $p = 0.429$ ) but significantly weaker in the Danish sample ( $p$ -values for interaction effects  $\leq 0.001$ ). As theorized, and mirroring the observational data (cf. Figure 1), the Danish respondents are less favorable towards delegate representation, most likely because they find it difficult to evaluate

**Figure 3: Effect of partisan relative to delegate condition (left-hand panel) and partisan relative to trustee condition (right-hand panel) on trust in politician by country**



*Note: N for left-hand panel: US = 499, UK = 537, DK = 503 (N preferring delegates over partisans: US = 399, UK = 418, DK = 286). N for right-hand panel: US = 501, UK = 536, DK = 516 (N preferring trustees over partisans: US = 392, UK = 373, DK = 333). Error bars depict 95% confidence intervals.*

multiple constituency incumbents. Still, even in the less likely Danish context with strong norms for party loyalty and multi-member districts, partisan representation has a significant negative effect on public trust in politicians.

The right-hand panel in Figure 3 displays the effects of the partisan condition relative to the trustee condition (i.e., Experiment 2) across the three samples. The results show significant negative effects of the partisan relative to the trustee condition, amounting to 14, 11, and 8 percentage points in the US, UK, and Danish samples, respectively ( $p$ -values  $< 0.001$ ). In line with the observational data, the effect of a politician acting as a partisan rather than a trustee does generally not differ across the countries.

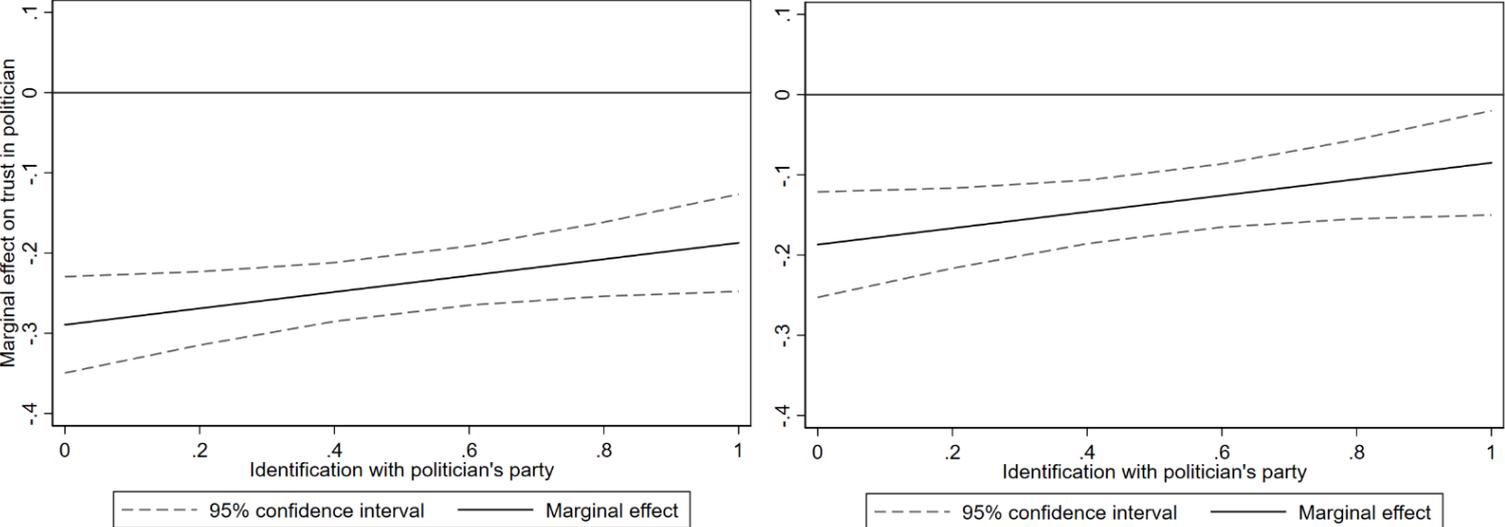
Furthermore, since low trust in politicians is problematic because it can lead to lower levels of support for political decisions (Easton 1965), the surveys also measured respondents' support for the described policy. In both experiments, partisan representation generally decreased respondents' support for the political decision to change food irradiation regulations (see Online Appendix F for operationalization and effects). Online Appendix F and G show that the reported experimental findings fully replicate in Survey 6 (the MTurk sample).

Surveys 4 and 5 replicate the findings while increasing experimental realism in various ways. Survey 4, presenting UK respondents with a real-life politician and policy proposal on a salient political issue, corroborates the UK findings from Survey 2. The results reveal a significant negative effect of politicians acting as partisans rather than delegates (23 percentage points,  $p < 0.001$ ) and as partisans rather than trustees (11 percentage points,  $p < 0.001$ ). Survey 5 presented US subjects with a more typical, low-stake policy-making situation where constituents are not mobilized and hold more mixed views on the policy. In line with the existing studies, this survey replicated the negative effect of politicians acting as partisans rather than delegates (25 percentage points,  $p < 0.001$ ).

Survey 6 demonstrates that citizens also respond with distrust when politicians from their own party act as partisans (for full models, see Online Appendix H). The results from

Experiments 1 and 2 in Survey 6, in which Mark Petersen was randomly described as a Republican or a Democrat, are depicted in the left-hand panel and right-hand panel of Figure 4, respectively. The left-hand panel shows the marginal effect of the partisan condition relative to the delegate condition on trust in the politician across respondents' identification with the politician's party. Two important patterns emerge. First, the effect of the partisan condition relative to the delegate condition does get significantly smaller as respondents' identification with the politician's party increases ( $p$ -value for interaction effect = 0.045). The effect is 10.54 percentage points weaker among respondents who identify strongly with the politician's party compared to respondents who identify strongly with the opposite party. Citizens are indeed less likely to respond negatively to partisan representation from their own party representatives. Second, despite this tendency, the negative effect remains strong and significant across all levels of party identification. Even among the respondents who identify strongly with the politician's party, the results reveal a significant 18.73 percentage point negative effect of partisan representation on trust ( $p < 0.001$ ). Importantly, the negative effect of partisan representation exists among politicians' own party supporters.

**Figure 4: Marginal effect of partisan relative to delegate condition (left-hand panel) and partisan relative to trustee condition (right-hand panel) on trust in politician across respondents' identification with the politician's party.**



*Note: N(Left-hand panel)=707. N(Right-hand panel)=665. Error bars depict 95% confidence intervals.*

The results from Experiment 2 are reported in the right-hand panel of Figure 4. Again, two patterns are worth noticing. First, the effect of the partisan condition relative to the trustee condition tends to decrease as respondents' identification with the politician's party increases. This interaction effect is only marginally significant ( $p = 0.067$ ). The effect is 10.54 percentage points weaker among strong identifiers with the politician's party relative to strong identifiers with the opposite party. This further, tentatively, supports the notion that citizens respond less negatively to partisan representation from their own party representatives. Second, and most importantly, partisan representation has a negative effect on trust across all levels of identification with the politician's party. Among strong identifiers with the politician's party, partisan representation decreases trust by 9.34 percentage points ( $p = 0.007$ ). As in Experiment 1, the negative effects of partisan representation also exist among citizens who identify strongly with the politician's party. These results also underline that the reported effects are not merely driven by non-partisan, independent citizens who feel dissatisfied with or detached from the political parties available to them.<sup>5</sup>

Finally, the negative effects of partisan representation extend to supporters of the incumbent party. The six surveys allow for a comprehensive test with 35 estimated interaction effects using both experimental and observational data (for full models, see Online Appendix J). Overall, the data show that the observational and experimental findings reported above do not vary across support for the incumbent party. Only four of the 35 interaction effects are statistically significant; two of these interactions indicate smaller effects among incumbent party supporters while the other two indicate larger effects.

In sum, the experimental results bolster the observational findings presented above: When politicians exhibit loyalty to their party at the expense of their own convictions or their

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<sup>5</sup> Analyses in Online Appendix I show that the effects among Independents are in between those of identifiers with the opposite party and the politician's party, making it meaningful to model the interaction as a linear effect.

constituency, it clashes with a majority of citizens' preferences for political representation and, in turn, results in general low levels of trust in politicians and support for political decisions.

## **Discussion**

This article points to a paradox in modern politics. Representation in modern democracies is organized around cohesive parties because they help ensure stable and effective governance and help citizens hold political elites accountable. Yet citizens generally show little appreciation for politicians who work in tandem with their party, and they respond to party loyalty with distrust in politicians and their policies. This underlines a structural mismatch between key institutions that organize political representation and the representation citizens expect from their representatives.

At the theoretical level, the article adds a new explanation to the literature on political trust, suggesting that citizens are dissatisfied with something that politicians in many political systems cannot easily change. In essence, citizens' dissatisfaction with partisan representation presents politicians with a cross-pressure between complying with their party to obtain nomination for election, campaign financing, promotions etc. and displaying independence from their party to voters to build trust and obtain office. Because obtaining nomination for election (and, arguably, campaign finances) precedes winning votes and office, it is not surprising that politicians often indulge their party before potential voters (see also Martin 2014). Importantly, partisan representation is one of several theoretical explanations that help account for low trust in politicians. As such, the article adds to important existing work revealing structural mismatches that depress and impede public trust in politicians (Kimball and Patterson 1997; Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002; Mutz 2015).

At the practical level, the findings raise new considerations of how to deal with low trust in politicians. An immediate solution could be to weaken parties' capacity to enforce loyalty and let politicians follow popular demands for party-independent behavior. Indeed, recent democratic reforms have decentralized the power within parties from the leadership to activists and citizens (e.g., candidate nomination), which weakens the control mechanisms parties hold to enforce

discipline (Bøggild and Petersen 2018). However, such developments may not be a long-term solution. Party disunity tends to make governance inefficient and unpredictable for citizens (Müller and Strøm 2000, 584–87). Moreover, voters should face increasing difficulties in holding elites to their election promises. If elites become able to evade accountability, trust in politicians will likely diminish further. A more viable approach could be to educate the public on the importance of parties and party cohesiveness. Recent work proposes to establish new venues for elites to interact with and explain behavior to citizens (Clarke et al. 2018), which could allow elites to justify party-loyal behavior and help citizens appreciate the logics of party democracy.

Three questions concerning the generalizability of the presented results warrant further discussion. First, without time series data, this article cannot speak to the public's opposition to partisan representation over time. It is possible that citizens have become less supportive of partisan representation due to increased individualization and dealignment in many countries. Such a development would be consistent with research that points to increasing personalization of politics, which implies that the public's attention and interest shift from political parties to individual representatives (Balmas et al. 2014). This might, in some cases, help explain the recent electoral success of political outsiders who, by definition, do not have a long record of party-loyal behavior. However, available historical data does not seem to support this interpretation. At least in the UK, citizens have expressed negative attitudes towards partisan politicians for more than 50 years, associating them with the pragmatism and commotion that mass politics often entails (Clarke et al. 2018). This corroborates the notion of citizens as 'stealth democrats' who expect politicians to simply serve their country and constituents and see little need for the partisan debate, conflict, and compromise in mass politics (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002). Moreover, the data material suggests that the negative effects of partisan representation are strongest among those with low prior trust in politicians (see Online Appendix K). This could indicate a downward spiral dynamic, in which citizens respond more and more negatively to partisan

representation as they become more distrustful of the motives, competence, and opinions of politicians.

Second, although the results demonstrate that citizens also respond with distrust to partisan representation from in-party politicians, it is possible that this effect does not emerge on highly polarized and ideologically charged issues (e.g., abortion, public health care) where citizens' partisan identities have shown to yield strong effects on political preferences (Druckman, Peterson, and Slothuus 2013). Hence, it is possible that preferences for representative styles vary across certain issue characteristics.

Third, the reported mismatches could be weaker under, particularly, two contextual conditions. First, as outlined above, citizens may be less inclined to prefer delegate relative to partisan representation in truly closed-list systems. Still, descriptive research from Spain suggests that citizens in closed-list systems also have strong preferences for delegate and trustee representation but that they perceive politicians as answering primarily to their party (Méndez-Lago and Martínez 2002, 70–74). This suggests, tentatively, that the partisan-delegate mismatch may also travel to a less likely, closed-list context. However, it remains to be seen if this mismatch translates into distrust in politicians in such settings. Second, in the Netherlands and Israel with no local constituencies in national politics, local representation may be less salient and important to citizens. However, some work indicates that citizens in the Netherlands also have preferences for local representation (e.g., Kaal 2016). This could mean that they experience the same—or a more severe—mismatch as the political system should be less conducive to the representative styles they prefer. Alternatively, citizens in such contexts could hold strong preferences for trustee vis-à-vis partisan representation and be more concerned with this particular mismatch.

In closing, the article raises questions for future research. First, how do citizens prioritize delegate relative to trustee representation? The data material (see Online Appendix K) indicates that most citizens prefer delegates over trustees but experience the opposite behavior from their politicians, which is associated with lower trust in politicians. However, firm evidence on these

patterns is needed (but see André & Depauw 2017). Second, the results do not speak to *why* partisan representation translates into distrust in politicians among citizens. Theoretically, the article proposes that partisan representation signals a lack of integrity, competence, and attitude proximity, and testing these mechanisms will be important to further understand and possibly accommodate public distrust in politicians. Finally, the findings open new avenues for normative scholars to develop democratic theory. While normative work on the democratic role of parties mainly centers on ensuring accountable and effective governance, it does not take citizens' preferences for representation into consideration. Thus, scholars and practitioners must aim to organize political representation that strikes a balance between accountable, effective governance and popular support.

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**Bibliographical statement**

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